

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SOCI, PINT, BL

SUBJ: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

REF: STATE 096621

1. SUMMARY- IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS REACHED A LOW POINT, BUT RECENTLY TENSIONS HAVE ABATED. LA PAZ A-63 WHICH WAS POUCHED APRIL 25 GIVES SOME DETAILS OF THIS LATEST OF PERIODIC MINI-CRISES IN RELATIONS.

2. CERTAIN PRIESTS HAVE BEEN OUTSPOKEN CRITICS OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND ALLEGED VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BOLIVIA. WHEN THESE PRIESTS ARE FOREIGN MISSIONARIES, AS THEY OFTEN ARE, THE GOB FREQUENTLY REJECTS THE CRITICISM AS THE INTERFERENCE OF FOREIGNERS IN INTERNAL BOLIVIAN POLITICAL AFFAIRS.

3. THE CHURCH, AS REPRESENTED BY THE BISHOPS CONFERENCE, DOES NOT NECESSARILY ENDORSE EVERY CHARGE OF INJUSTICE LEVELED BY INDIVIDUAL CLERGYMEN AGAINST THE GOB. BISHOPS INSIST ON THE CLERGY'S RIGHT TO DENOUNCE INJUSTICE BUT NOT TO MEDDLE IN POLITICS. BISHOPS BELIEVE THE GOB TOO AUTOMATICALLY EQUATES ANY CRITICISM WITH MEDDLING IN POLITICS. IN JANUARY, THE BISHOPS BELIEVED THEY HAD THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR'S AGREEMENT THAT THE GOB WOULD CONSULT
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WITH THEM BEFORE TAKING ACTION AGAINST CLERGYMEN ACTIVE

AS SOCIAL CRITICS. HOWEVER, IN MARCH THE GOB EXPELLED TWO PRIESTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE ON CHARGES OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY, NOTIFYING BUT NOT CONSULTING WITH THE BISHOPS. AT THIS POINT CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS WERE INDEED VERY STRAINED.

4. POLITICALLY "PROGRESSIVE" PRIESTS TRIED TO ESCALATE THE CONFRONTATION FURTHER BY HAVING THE COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, WHICH THEY HEAVILY INFLUENCED, LAUNCH A CAMPAIGN FOR 100,000 SIGNATURES ON A PETITION ASKING RECALL OF THE EXPELLED PRIESTS AND ATTACKING MANY OF THE POLICIES OF THE GOB. THE BISHOPS, HOWEVER, SUSPENDED THE COMMISSION, EVIDENTLY TO PREVENT THE CHURCH FROM BEING DRAWN INTO POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES BY THE ACTION OF A RELATIVELY FEW "PROGRESSIVE" PRIESTS. THE COMMISSION WAS RECENTLY REORGANIZED BY THE BISHOPS WITH A NATIVE BOLIVIAN BISHOP AS CHIEF ADVISER AND A NEW CONSTITUTION GIVING A LARGE ROLE IN THE COMMISSION TO BOLIVIAN LAYMEN, WHERE PREVIOUSLY, FOREIGN CLERGYMEN HAD DOMINATED. THE GOB HAS EXPRESSED GREAT SATISFACTION WITH THESE DEVELOPMENTS.

5. THE BISHOPS RESERVE THE RIGHT OF THE CHURCH TO CRITICIZE SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND THEY BELIEVE THERE IS AMPLE ROOM FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM OF THE GOB IN THIS REGARD. THEY ALSO BELIEVE THE GOB COULD IMPROVE ITS RESPECT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS. NEVERTHELESS, THE BISHOPS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE RENEWED DIALOGUE. THE BISHOPS CONSIDER THE EXPULSION ISSUE CLOSED AND THEY HAVE ANNOUNCED THAT THEY WOULD NOT REQUEST THE RETURN OF THE TWO PRIESTS.

6. US INTEREST IN THE DISPUTE HAS BEEN ALLEGED BY A CLANDESTINE CIRCULAR PURPORTING TO BE THE CONFESSIONS OF AN OFFICIAL OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR ALTHOUGH MOST LIKELY THE WORK OF SOME FOREIGN PRIESTS OF "PROGRESSIVE" POLITICAL OUTLOOK OR LEFT-LEANING LAYMEN ASSOCIATED WITH THEM (SEE SEPTTEL). THE CHARGE THAT THE US IS ASSISTING THE GOB IN A CAMPAIGN TO DESTROY THE CHURCH WOULD MAKE SOCIALLY ACTIVE PRIESTS LOOK LIKE VICTIMS OF FOREIGN IMPERIALISM. THIS TACTIC MAYBE A REACTION TO THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR'S CONSTANT RESORT TO APPEALS TO NATIONALISM IN

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DENOUNCING SOCIAL CRITICISM BY FOREIGN PRIESTS.

7. COMMENT: ON AND OFF CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE HAVE BEEN REGULAR OCCURRENCES IN THE PAST AND ARE LIKELY TO PERSIST WITH BOTH SIDES AVOIDING ANY DEFINITE BREAK. HOWEVER, A NEW DIMENSION WILL BE ADDED IF PROGRESSIVE CLERGYMEN ATTEMPT TO MOUNT AN INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO DENIGRATE THE GOB'S REPUTATION. THE BOLIVIAN

BISHOPS WOULD HAVE LITTLE CONTROL OVER THE LETTERS OR
ARTICLES PASSED TO FOREIGN NEWS SERVICES, AND THE GOB WOULD
LIKELY EXPEL SUSPECT FOREIGN CLERGYMEN - A MOVE THE
BOLIVIAN CHURCH, WHICH IS HEAVILY DEPENDENT ON FOREIGN
CLERGY, WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO ACCEPT.
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